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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KATHMANDU 000122

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM NP

SUBJECT: NEPAL: ARE THE STUDENT PROTESTS RESONATING WITHIN NEPALI SOCIETY?

REF: KATHMANDU 64

Classified By: CDA Robert K. Boggs for reasons 1.5 (b,d).

¶11. (C) Summary. Now at the month-long mark, student union-led protests have grown increasingly critical of the King and have even begun calling for the abolition of the monarchy and the institution of a republican state. The demonstrations are the largest and most sustained protests since the dissolution of Nepal's Parliament in October 2002. Although the political parties have not sanctioned officially the student unions' call for a republic, party leaders have claimed that there is a small, but growing, sentiment within the parties that the monarchy has made itself obsolete. The government claims that Maoists are influencing the demonstrators, using the protests to discredit the King and drive a wedge between the government and the people. It remains unclear whether the student protests reflect popular sentiment in Nepal or whether they are merely a manifestation of the political parties' efforts to pressure the King to appoint an all-party government. End Summary.

Student Demonstrations: Calls for Republican State

¶12. (C) On January 15, the ongoing student protests reached the one-month mark and, in the past few days, have turned more destructive and more anti-monarchical. During a one-hour nation-wide road blockade on January 14, demonstrators called for a republican state and the abolition of the monarchy. According to Gagan Thapa, General Secretary of the Nepal Students Union (NSU), the Nepali Congress party's student wing, three of the seven main student unions had decided formally to call for a republican state. Two of the three are affiliated with the far-left political parties -- People's Front Nepal and Nepal Workers and Peasants Party -- while the other is the Maoist student wing, operating underground since the end of the ceasefire. Thapa contends that public opinion favors the student protests and that calls for a republican state have led visibly to an increase in the number of demonstrators over the past two days. Thapa reported that, on January 14, there were at least 2,000 protesters in Kathmandu with only 25 percent of them active members of the student unions.

¶13. (C) Thapa indicated that NSU and the CPN-UML affiliated student union, ANNFSU, would meet on January 15 to plan the student protest program for the next two weeks. He said it is likely that the two unions would focus their protests on one key demand: that the King step back from the "royal move of October 4, 2002 (in which the King dismissed then-Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba) and restore power to the people." Thapa was vague about how the King should restore power to the people, agreeing that both restoration of the parliament or an all-party government would satisfy that demand. If the King fails to act, however, NSU and ANNFSU might decide to join the call for a republican state, he said. Thapa claimed that the protests will continue until the King satisfies the student unions' demand.

¶14. (C) Although the demonstrations initially were limited to Kathmandu, police contacts reported that on January 14, students took to the streets in 24 of Nepal's 75 districts in groups ranging from 50 demonstrators to several thousand. Some of these demonstrations turned violent, leaving five students wounded in Kathmandu, six in Chitwan District in the lowland Terai and seven in Makwanpur District, south of Kathmandu Valley. According to NSU's Gagan Thapa, none of the injuries were critical, and no students remain in the hospital. Despite numerous arrests on January 14, all students were released that same day. In at least one district, political party leaders participated in the protests. One contact in Chitwan District indicated that roughly 500 people participated in the January 14 demonstration, which led to the injury of a CPN-UML district leader and the ex-deputy mayor of Bharatpur during a baton charge by police.

Political Parties Stand Back, But Not Too Far

15. (C) Although political party leaders claim that the students' call for a republican state is not sanctioned officially, some elements within the parties appear to be supportive of the student movement. Press reports on January 14 quoted Nepali Congress Treasurer Mahanta Thakur with suggesting that the protests would continue "until and unless the King abdicates the throne." Reacting to this press report, Nepali Congress Spokesperson, Arjun K.C., said privately that Thakur's statement did not reflect party policy, but was the personal opinion of some party members. Sujata Koirala, daughter of Nepali Congress President and frequent Prime Minister G.P. Koirala, claimed "that is what the young people are saying." She added that a recent delegation of Nepali Congress student leaders had told her father they would press their republican aims, even against party Central Committee policy.

16. (C) Likewise, Jhala Nath Khanal, International Relations Director for the Communist Party of Nepal - United Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML), indicated that some party members might be encouraging the student movement and that there is a growing sentiment within the party that perhaps the monarchy should be abolished. Another CPN-UML leader, K.P. Oli was quoted by the press with suggesting that the students' slogan "in favor of a republic is not a problem, but an attempt to resolve the problem." Khanal blamed, in part, the Indian Government for being a "poor influence" on the student movement and suggested that India was encouraging the rising anti-monarchical sentiment in Nepal.

17. (SBU) On January 16, the Royal Nepal Army spokesman, Colonel Deepak Gurung averred that Maoists are "involved" in the ongoing student demonstrations. Although Gurung provided few details, he suggested that Maoists might be using the protests to commit violence against the government.

Comment

18. (C) It is unclear whether the ongoing student union-led demonstrations reflect popular sentiment in Nepal. They are the largest and longest sustained protests since the dissolution of Parliament in October 2002. It is important to recognize, however, that the student union leadership is comprised predominantly by men in their mid-30s and 40s who are not students, but politicians in their own right. The student union leaders' capacity to rally support around a particular slogan might have more to do with the lack of youth employment opportunities and the current winter recess for public universities than with broad-based dissatisfaction with the monarchy on the part of Nepal's youth. Many urban Nepalis allege that some demonstrators have less interest in political causes than in daily stipends paid by the parties for demonstrating. Many of our Nepali contacts also have expressed disapproval of the vandalism of private property by the demonstrators.

19. (C) However, no one within the political parties or in civil society has criticized the growing radicalization of the student movement. Although the political parties allege that the student unions' call for a republican state is not sanctioned by the parties themselves, the parties are no doubt using the student movement to maintain pressure on the King while refraining from direct confrontation with the Palace. The possibility that the Maoists have infiltrated the ranks of protesters is unsurprising given the Maoist political agenda. Maoists would like nothing more than to discredit the King and drive a wedge between the political parties and the government. Absent greater progress toward reconciliation between the King and the parties, we expect the student protests to continue. End Comment.
MALINOWSKI